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TAGS: [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#) [CU](#)
SUBJECT: REGIME IMAGES: CASTRO PASSES TORCH TO CHAVEZ

Classified By: COM Michael E. Parmly for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

1. (C) Cuban state media on August 14 released still images, and then a video, of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's bedside visit with Fidel Castro a day earlier. Photographic images charged with symbolic meaning are among the hallmarks of Castro's reign; the latest images symbolize Castro's effort to pass the torch to his ideological heir, the younger, vigorous Chavez. A smiling Raul Castro looks on, content with his role as Cuba's designated caretaker, and tacitly blessing Chavez's anointment as the new, worldwide standard-bearer. In our view, the images indicate that the regime is preparing for Fidel's imminent departure from power, whether by death or incapacitation. End Summary.

Images of Chavez's Bedside Visit...

2. (U) State newspaper "Granma" on August 14 published photographs of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's August 13, three-hour bedside visit, presumably in Havana, with the ailing Fidel Castro. Raul Castro was present, and for the first time was pictured with Chavez. Another image shows Castro and Chavez together gripping an object, reputedly a replica of Simon Bolivar's dagger that Chavez gave Castro. Another shows the two Castros and Chavez gathered around a 1959 painting of Fidel by Mexican artist David Alfaro Siquieros. In the video released by state media hours later, Raul tells Fidel that the (extremely valuable) painting was found in a Communist Party warehouse, and seemed like a nice birthday present. Chavez says that he was working on a painting of Fidel all night, but was not able to finish it on time. Chavez criticizes the Mexican painter's rendering of Fidel's nose, saying it is too straight. "It has curves here and here," says Chavez, "and it's like a little tomato at the end." "Maybe it needs surgery," to which Fidel responds "what, more surgery?" Raul defends his brother's nose, saying it has a "perfect Greek profile."

...Charged with Messages

3. (C) "Granma" billed the event as an "unforgettable visit among brothers." The video shows a vigorous Chavez leading a teasing, brotherly conversation with Fidel, whose voice is weak as he responds supine from his bed. Both are wearing identical, bright red shirts emblazoned with "Venezuela-Cuba" and the corresponding flags. Raul is in uniform off to the side, smiling. The two "enjoy a frugal snack" (yogurt), and reminisce while looking at a photo album of their visits together. Toward the end of the video, Fidel appears to impart advice to Chavez as the latter grasps his hands and listens intently (there is no audio recording at this point, just melancholy music). The camera focuses on Fidel's wrinkled, withered hands.

Comments

4. (C) The images, rerun many times on Cuban TV, indicate that the regime is preparing for Fidel's imminent departure from power, whether by death or incapacitation. They afford

important insights into the regime's intentions. Raul Castro, always in Fidel's shadow and ready to do his bidding, is anointed as Cuba's caretaker once Fidel is gone. The associated film footage of Raul greeting Chavez at the airport brought this home even more vividly. More importantly, Raul is seen blessing and acquiescing to the anointment of Chavez as the new, international standard-bearer.

¶5. (C) The identical red shirts are intended to cast Fidel and Chavez as brothers. Their grasping the dagger together is intended to show virility (Chavez even tells Fidel to "hold it up straight"). Chavez's grasping the painting of the young, heroic-looking Fidel is intended to equate him with the youthful Fidel.

¶6. (C) The visit made clear that Chavez is Castro's heir-apparent. (Not Evo Morales, nor Daniel Ortega, whose visit here last week was not given much publicity.) We can expect a variation on this theme to play out on a bigger stage when Cuba hosts the NAM Summit next month. Our sense is that the whole deal will quickly unravel after Fidel dies. Raul Castro and Chavez view each other as rivals. Furthermore, Cubans are generally dismissive of Venezuelans, whom they view as less cultured. There is rife resentment in Cuba of Venezuelans' perceived usurpation of university seats and hospital beds, not to mention the 20,000-plus Cuban doctors currently working in Venezuela. Our new immigration initiative should help exploit this weakness.

PARMLY